

When wine collectors get together they always compare weapons. After 20 years of collecting wine, I've gathered quite an arsenal. Central to anyone's wine tools is a corkscrew or the space age Rabbit. You have to get the cork (real or artificial) out of the bottle to enjoy the wine. Beyond this, every other tool is a luxury.

Corkscrews were invented for corks. So, in terms of wine, they are a rather recent invention. Until the 17th century (1600's) glass was rare, fragile, and expensive. Wine was stored in casks or clay jars. In fact, the decanter was invented far before the corkscrew. It's hard to believe, but in France, until 1728 it was illegal to sell wine in bottles. The French couldn't control the quantities sold in different sized bottles. When cork was first used to stopper bottles, it protruded out the end of the bottle so it was easy to remove. The actual widespread bottling of wine occurred at the end of the 19th century (1850's). The first patent for a corkscrew was filed in 1795 by Samuel Henshall, an Englishman. Funny the corkscrew was probably invented first for beer and perfume bottles. These very small precious metal and precious stone corkscrews, used for non-wine bottles, have been found in mainland Europe and are very rare and valuable.

There are basically three parts to every corkscrew and some variations - the handle, the shank and the worm or screw. The worm can take several forms and shapes – the Archimedean worm (blended thread wound around a pointed steel rod soldered in place), a Helical worm (the most common), a Center worm, a Speed worm and an Auger worm. Someone even tried a double worm, but it failed. Wow can you believe all the choices? And you just wanted to get the cork out. This will teach you to ask me a question about corkscrews. There are even right and left handed corkscrews.

The first corkscrews were known as pocket corkscrews. The screw was covered in a sheath and the instrument was small enough to carry in your pocket. Never creating the comment, "Are you happy to see me?"

The first worm with a folding action was successfully developed in 1873. It was a flange with a guarded ball joint welded to the shank. It was from this design most modern corkscrews evolved. You should also have a pronged puller. These were designed so that you could reuse the cork, not a bad idea when corks were more expensive. As time passed other items were added to the corkscrew. One that didn't survive was a brush attached to the handle. The idea was to clean the label and top of the bottle, but very ineffective in reality. Next came knives to cut the wire or wax that held the cork in place. These have survived, but can't be carried on airplanes (duh).

Mechanical corkscrews were made in the last part of the 18th century (1760) and are the first generation of the very popular "Rabbit." The principle is reflected in a Latin phrase found on many old mechanical corkscrews – "Obstando Promoves" (by standing firm one advances).

If rack and pinion mechanisms work then gas should too. So in the 1960's gas powered corkscrews were developed. I have several of these and they work. The idea is to penetrate the cork and then put gas into the chamber between the top of the wine and the bottom of the cork, forcing the cork out. However, you run the risk of the very sharp needle and on rare occasions a shattered bottle.

Finally we have the modern day waiter's friend – the lever corkscrew. The worm coated with anti-adhesive makes the job even easier. This is my preference. You can get a double jointed one which helps with longer corks. However, this requires a new skill set and is not as easy as it looks.

Here's a riddle. Do you know what it is? The poem dates from the Victorian period:

Tho' I alas, a prisoner be
My trade is prisoners to set free
And when I have them by the pole
I drag them upward from their hole
Tho' in myself nor drink nor food
Yet of great service when improved

One last thought. There are thousands of people who collect corkscrews and some are worth thousands of dollars. Over 1,000 have been patented and even now people are getting rich by designing new and better ones. But remember this, "No corkscrew ever yet pulled a man or woman out of trouble."